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**CENTER OF GRAVITY IN IRAQ:
IS IT THE PEOPLE?**

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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23 October 2006

Abstract

Center of Gravity in Iraq: Is it the People?

The war in Iraq has prompted many military leaders and policy makers to label the “people” as the center of gravity in Iraq. Using definitions and analytical tools from Joint Publication 5-0 and Naval Warfare Planning Document 5-01, this paper analyzes the center of gravity of the Sunni insurgency in relation to the US-led Coalition. This paper focuses on center of gravity and corresponding critical factors, capabilities, and requirements and explores possible critical vulnerabilities of the two sides. This paper also broadly explores the nature of the Sunni insurgency and offers recommendations for neutralizing the insurgency.

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Introduction

The nature of the current conflict in Iraq does not lend itself to straightforward analysis; the complex Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish issues, mixed with tribal alliances and the outside influences of terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda make Iraq a quagmire of opposing influences and conflicting objectives. However, in-depth analysis is critical to victory in Iraq, and as students of military operations know, one of the critical tasks “in the operational design process is the identification of friendly and enemy Centers of Gravity.”¹ In 2003, Coalition forces, led by the United States, undertook Operation Iraqi Freedom; soon after the major combat operations were complete Saddam Hussein’s regime was no longer in power and the Coalition found itself facing an unexpected insurgency and a shift in center of gravity. As General Wallace, commander of U.S. Army V Corps during Operation Iraqi Freedom, states, “when the regime fell, the center of gravity shifted subtly to the people of Iraq.”² The idea of the Iraqi people as the COG is often quoted and seems to be the default position of many military and political analysts, and given the endorsement of General Wallace the concept certainly holds a strong level of legitimacy. The concept of “the people” as the COG is certainly appealing, and while they are certainly important to the outcome of the war, at the operational level the people are not the center of gravity. To understand this concept requires a broader understanding of center of gravity and the corresponding concepts of critical factors, critical capabilities, and critical requirements. In turn, understanding how these concepts apply to the situation in Iraq is crucial to formulating a strategy to successfully deal with the current violent situation.

Understanding Center of Gravity

In order to fully appreciate the concept of center of gravity as it applies to Iraq, one must first understand the key concepts and methodology associated with center of gravity analysis.

Unfortunately, as Dr. Joe Strange points out there is “considerable confusion regarding concepts and definitions of centers of gravity.”³ This confusion has led to on-going debate over center of gravity doctrine, and at the extreme, has led some to conclude that “Centers of Gravity are a Myth.”⁴ Additionally, the fact that “insurgencies are not primarily military problems”⁵ opens the door to debate over the validity of Clausewitzian, conventional warfare centric, center of gravity analysis. However, center of gravity analysis is relevant and crucial to understanding and defeating insurgencies. As Brad E. O’Neill writes:

“Before making a systematic appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of an insurgency, it is important to have as clear a picture as possible of the goals, forms of warfare, and strategy of the insurgents. With these firmly in mind, it is possible to set forth the things the insurgents need to do to be successful....As for the effectiveness of various strategies, it is essential to identify those factors that experts deem crucial for their success...”⁶

While the terms are not exact, the concepts stated by Dr. O’Neill are very similar to the concepts of Critical Factors, Critical Requirements, Critical Capabilities, and Critical Vulnerabilities that are central to the center of gravity analysis.

To begin, the following joint doctrine definitions are key to the concept of center of gravity:

Center of gravity: the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom, of action, or will to act.⁷

Critical strength: those capabilities considered vital for the accomplishment of a given or assumed military objective.⁸

Critical weakness: those sources of power that, while considered essential for the accomplishment of the assigned mission, are grossly inadequate to perform their intended task or function.⁹

Critical factor: cumulative term for the critical strengths and critical weaknesses of a military or nonmilitary source of power.”¹⁰

Critical capability: an adversary means that is considered a crucial enabler for a center of gravity to function, and is essential to the accomplishment of the adversary’s assumed objective(s).¹¹

Critical requirement: an essential condition, resource, and means for a critical capability to be fully operational.¹²

Critical vulnerability: an aspect or component of the adversary’s critical requirements, which is deficient or vulnerable to direct or indirect attack that will create decisive or significant effects.¹³

Once key definitions are established, using Naval Warfare Publication 5-01 as a framework, the first step to identifying and analyzing centers of gravity is to identify strategic and operational objectives. Once these objectives are determined, critical factors (critical strengths and critical weaknesses) associated with those objectives are determined and analyzed; from the list of critical strengths comes the center or centers of gravity. Once the center of gravity has been identified, critical capabilities are determined relative to that center of gravity. These critical capabilities are in turn analyzed to identify critical requirements. At this point, critical vulnerabilities are identified and can come from critical strengths, weaknesses, capabilities, or requirements.¹⁴ The basics of this framework will be used to analyze the current insurgency in Iraq.

The Sunni Insurgents

Understanding the nature of the entire insurgency in Iraq is a difficult task, and a thorough knowledge is well beyond the scope of this document. While the Sunni insurgency is only slightly less complicated, the basic nature of the Sunni insurgents will be the primary focus of this paper.

Using the United States Institute for Peace report, *Who are the Insurgents*, as a framework, the Sunni Insurgents can be roughly classified into three groups: 1) Secularists, 2) Tribalists, and 3) Islamists. The Secularists are predominately Ba’thist, Saddamists, and Arab Nationalists. The Islamists fall into the two general categories of Moderate or Radical. The tribes are subdivided into “hundreds of small and medium-size tribes and sub-tribal units.”¹⁵ While these categories are convenient for analysis purposes, the secular, tribal, and Islamist concerns are often mutually reinforcing, and goals and motivations are often “elastic and multifaceted.”¹⁶

The Secularists are largely made up of Ba’th Party members, their families, and those members of the “Sunni cliques”¹⁷ who lost a great deal of economic, social, and political power with the fall of Saddam Hussein. While the minority Sunni Arab population as a whole has enjoyed privilege over the Shiite majority for centuries, the formation of Iraq in 1921 solidified that control, and under Saddam Hussein Ba’thist enjoyed extended dominance over the Shiites and Kurds. Of course this dominance came to an end with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and with the new democratically elected government of Iraq. As a result, many Ba’thist have taken up arms against coalition forces and the new Iraqi government. They call upon pan-Arab nationalism and Iraqi patriotism and fight under “the banner of freeing Iraq of all foreign troops and influences,”¹⁸ but their battle is basically a sectarian fight to regain control of Iraq.¹⁹

While the aims and motivations of the Ba’thist are somewhat simple to categorize, those of the tribes are not as straight forward. However, in general terms tribal motivations revolve around tribal values and norms and include economic, cultural, and political interests. Under Saddam Hussein many tribes profited from cross border smuggling and

were often paid off for good political behavior. Once Saddam's regime fell, these profits were cut off as Coalition forces cracked down on cross-border movement, and the Coalition Provisional Authority and the new Iraqi government declined to buy off the tribes. While directly economic, loss of these profits brought corresponding loss in local status and prestige. Additionally, tribal motivations to take up arms against the coalition have been fueled by perceived and actual offensive acts by the Coalition forces. Body searches, men being pinned to the ground by the feet of Coalition soldiers, the death of noncombatants, and abuses of Iraqis at Abu Ghraib have activated tribal sensitivities and concepts of honor, duty, and revenge. These issues, coupled with the strong warrior tradition of the Sunni tribesmen, have formed the overall basis of their hostility toward US-led forces and the new Iraqi government.²⁰

While the Islamist aspect of the current insurgency can be broken down into Moderates and Radicals, both groups came about from the overall resurgence in Islam over the last decade of Saddam's rule. Many factors contributed to this rise in Islam, but key aspects include the resurgence of the mosques as local religious, social, and political focal points; the relative ambivalence of the Ba'th party, especially to the rise in Sunni Islam; and the Ba'th party losing power and confidence in its own ideology. In the decades following the first Gulf War, Saddam's power and influence declined throughout Iraq. As a result, when he recognized that large portions of the population were returning to religion he decided to officially embrace Islam and even created a Ba'thi form of Islam as a means to regain elements of his past control. Of course, Saddam embraced Islam within the framework of maintaining his own dominance, and any perceived Islamic threat to his control was dealt with harshly. However, once Saddam was removed from power, the

political influence and social status of the Imams and khatibs increased, and Islam flourished without the check of a hostile regime. From this growth came both the moderates and the radicals. In the current situation, moderates are largely amiable to reconciliation with the current Iraqi government, and those who do fight the US-led Coalition do so largely under the auspices of tribal motivations. The native Iraqi “ultraradicals” on the other hand view the US-led Coalition as strictly a western occupying force in an Islamic homeland, and in their opinion any future Iraqi government “would need to be both viciously against the United States and rabidly for Taliban-style Islam.”²¹

As mentioned earlier, the three broad categories used to classify the Sunni insurgents are convenient for analysis purposes but certainly over simplify the complexity of the situation. In real world Iraq, secular goals, tribal responsibilities and Islamist motivations interact, counteract, and are often mutually reinforcing. However, a broad brush understanding of the Sunni insurgency is critical to the center of gravity analysis.

Sunni Insurgent Center of Gravity Analysis:

As mentioned above, the first step to analyzing the center of gravity is identifying the strategic and operational objectives. Typically, military strategic objectives flow from national strategic objectives and in an insurgency would most likely flow from the overall political objective of the insurgents. However, in the case of the Sunni insurgents identifying the strategic objective is problematic when attempted within the context of Ba’thist, tribal, and Islamist motivations. As indicated earlier, from a broad political standpoint, the Ba’thist generally want to return to the old regime, tribes want to return to local hegemony, and the ultraradical Islamists desire a strict Islamic state. However, the “concrete questions

pertaining to the nature of a future government”²² have been left for a later date; basically the Sunnis do not “have a well developed alternative to the government.”²³ Instead the insurgent groups seem to agree on an interim end state – the withdrawal of coalition forces;²⁴ this interim end state is basically their strategic objective. Based on this strategic objective, the insurgents’ operational objectives are to create “steady and continuous harassment”²⁵ and “thwart any normalization.”²⁶

While there are numerous critical strengths and weaknesses related to the objective of thwarting normalization, the current operational center of gravity is the individual insurgent groups themselves. Looking at the definition of center of gravity, it is the insurgent groups that are the “sources of power” that provide the “physical strength” for the overall insurgency at an operational level. That is not to say that the “moral” aspects of the insurgency or their “freedom of action” and “will to act” are not important; they are. However, “center of gravity is always linked to the objective.”²⁷ The insurgents choose violence as their primary means of reaching their objective, and since the insurgent groups are themselves carrying out the violence, they are the operational center of gravity.

Based on the insurgent groups as the operational center of gravity, key critical capabilities include their ability to apply force and their local freedom of action. Related to these capabilities, critical requirements include weapons availability, training, the availability of individual insurgents willing to fight, and the support of the local populace. Weapons availability and training aside, these capabilities and requirements are directly or closely related to the people, which is why the “people” are often cited as the center of gravity. Local freedom of action is obviously crucial to the insurgents and obviously flows in large part from the willingness of the people to support the insurgents. However, active support of

the people is not required; as with many insurgencies, the insurgents groups in Iraq only require the passive approval of the local populace.²⁸ It is also important to emphasize that the insurgents require only “local” freedom of action; local implies both time and space. The insurgents only need freedom of movement when and where they choose to conduct operations and do not need, nor do they seem to desire, overall control of large regions of Iraq or Iraq as a whole. The requirement for individual insurgent fighters is an obvious requirement and again goes directly to the people. The insurgents need sufficient numbers of recruits, motivated for the cause, to join their ranks.

Identifying critical vulnerabilities from this analysis is the next step and the most difficult in relation to the Sunni insurgents. From an operational level, “seams”²⁹ are not readily apparent, and the Sunni insurgents appear consolidated in their objective of removing the coalition. However, the divergent, underlying motivations of the Ba’thist, the Tribes, and the Islamists, present opportunities to attack the overall legitimacy of the insurgent groups and form the basis and foundation of potential critical vulnerabilities. As previously noted, the Ba’thist generally desire a return to the old regime, tribes want increased local hegemony, and the ultraradical Islamists desire a strict Islamic state. These divergent goals illustrate fractures in the Sunni insurgency at a strategic level and add an underlying layer of illegitimacy to the overall goal of ridding Iraq of the foreign invader. It is this potential illegitimacy that offers the best opportunity to separate the insurgents from the population thereby reducing their freedom of action and overall ability to carry out violence.

Additionally, since the insurgents can not agree on a strategic goal beyond departure of the Coalition, they have not put forward a clear or viable long-term vision or alternative to the

current government in Iraq;³⁰ this fact adds another element to the legitimacy struggle within Iraq.

Coalition Center of Gravity Analysis:

When viewed in relation to the Sunni insurgent objective, the Coalition operational objective becomes neutralizing the insurgent violence; note that the objective is not the destruction of the insurgent groups. A key first step in neutralizing the insurgents is establishing physical security; therefore the operational center of gravity for the Coalition is the physical security forces themselves. In other words, the military and police force hold the “capability” and “source of power” that provide the “physical strength” to oppose the insurgent violence. Again, the “moral” aspects and “will to act” are certainly important, but neither is capable of providing security by itself. Of course, in the broader sense, providing security encompasses the police, the military, a functioning justice system, and the overall rule of law;³¹ but at the operational level physical security must come first.

Similar, yet opposite the insurgents, Coalition force key critical capabilities include the ability to apply force, collect intelligence, and maintain mobility. Crucial to these capabilities are several critical requirements including sustained control of key areas and support of the population. These capabilities and requirements differ from the insurgent capabilities and requirements in important areas. First, since the insurgents typically choose the battleground, coalition forces require sustained and wide-ranging mobility and freedom of action not just local freedom of movement. Additionally, Coalition forces require close support of the population especially in the realm of sustained control and accurate intelligence. That is not to say that the insurgents rely less on the population than the

Coalition; instead, it means the Coalition, as an external force, must pursue the active, positive involvement of the population.

The fact that the Coalition is an external force leads to its major critical vulnerability, lack of legitimacy. Coalition forces are portrayed as an occupying force by the insurgent groups and a large portion of the Iraqi people adhere to the same belief.³² This perception greatly diminishes Coalition legitimacy and in turn reduces the legitimacy of the Iraq Security Forces and the Iraqi government who are portrayed as “collaborators.”³³ This lack of legitimacy is a major roadblock to building positive relationships with the local populace and is therefore a major issue to providing security and neutralizing the insurgents.

Recommendations:

The center of gravity analysis is useful because it offers a framework from which to compare opposing objectives, critical factors, and ultimately determine critical vulnerabilities. Specifically, the analysis reinforces the fact that ‘establishing internal security measures after major combat should be the most immediate and important concern of policy makers.’³⁴ Secondly, the analysis strengthens the concept that the war in Iraq, like many counter-insurgency operations, is in large part a battle for the support of the people and is framed by a battle for legitimacy.³⁵ To summarize, the Sunni insurgents are using violence as a means to disrupt the rebuilding of Iraq, and the Coalition and Iraqi Defense forces are fighting to neutralize the insurgent violence. For the Sunni insurgents, lack of a clear end state and diverging strategic goals potentially hamper their popular support and legitimacy and represent their critical vulnerabilities. The “occupation force” label and lack

of Iraqi lead are the Coalition's critical vulnerabilities and threaten the Coalition in a similar manner.

To tackle the physical security issues, operational commanders need to adopt a local security concept focusing on key areas and founded on the concept of sustained security within these areas. Military commanders should only broaden their security efforts after internal security, a viable police force, and a judicial system have taken root and true internal security can be maintained. This concept is similar to the "ink spot" model proposed by Andrew Krepinevich.³⁶ While the "ink spot" model is not a perfect solution to the security issue, the basic concept offers the potential for true, sustainable security and also addresses key issues of legitimacy.

The operational commander in Iraq certainly understands the "primacy of security,"³⁷ and certainly understands that true security is much more than soldiers standing on a piece of ground with their M-16s. True security involves the interaction of military force, police force, and a justice system.³⁸ However, even if physical security were the only element to internal security, current violence levels in Iraq certainly indicate that the current military and police force structure in Iraq "can not guarantee security to all of Iraq simultaneously."³⁹ That being said, it is ill advised to attempt to provide security everywhere in Iraq; doing so would and has resulted in a roving sort of security posture throughout large portions of the country. Military forces often have to recapture towns and cities. Of course these towns and villages were never truly secure as the "rule of the gun" was never replaced by true rule of law. Instead the terrorists and insurgents simply went back to work when the military forces left since the police forces and justice systems were never capable of establishing sustainable and persistent security. This rotating security results in an ebb and flow of power within

regions and has and will continue to benefit the insurgents by undermining the legitimacy of Coalition Forces, Iraqi Security Forces and ultimately the legitimacy of the government of Iraq. Instead, sustained security may convince the local populace that the Coalition forces and ultimately the Iraqi government are not only “serious about protecting them”⁴⁰ but capable of protecting them both of which are important factors to the support of the populace and for overall legitimacy. Of course, sufficient and sustainable security does not imply a complete end to all violence in the secured region. Rather, it implies that security conditions are such that the political and economic improvement efforts in the region can progress.

Of course one negative aspect of the “oil spot” or concentrated security effort is the fact that certain portions for the country will be left without government sponsored security and will therefore be left to the control of local village chieftains, warlords, insurgents groups, or terrorists groups. In theory this situation goes against the idea that the government must be in control of the legitimate security apparatus. However, as previously discussed attempts to secure the entire country and the associated roving security posture only undermine the true legitimacy of the military and ultimately the government. While the Coalition and the government may lose some legitimacy in the ungoverned areas, it is more important to maintain security in areas considered officially “secure.” In essence, the true legitimacy comes from backing up claims that an area is secure.

While the “oil spot” model provides a basic framework for security based on available assets and the concept of local security first, it also addresses another major hurdle in the war in Iraq – the sheer complexity of the insurgency. During the Cold War many strategists and policy makers painted the world-wide threat of communism as a “monolithic” beast headed by the Soviet Union. Vietnamese communists, Korean communists, and Cuban

communists were lumped together and containment was the order of the day. Similarly, counter-insurgency expert Dr. David Kilcullen addresses the “Global Jihad” and the “Global Insurgency.”⁴¹ That is not to say that Dr. Kilcullen believes in a monolithic jihadist threat. On the contrary, his “disaggregation strategy means different things in different theaters...at different times.”⁴² Likewise, the Sunni insurgency in Iraq means different things, in different regions and has different goals at different times. As discussed previously, many of the insurgent groups share similar objectives, motivations, and backgrounds and can indeed be broken into broad categories such as Ba’thist, moderates, and ultraradicals, but an overall, accurate categorization of what constitutes the “Iraqi” or “Sunni” insurgency is not readily forthcoming. Therefore it is essential that military commanders in Iraq not think of the Sunni insurgency or the Iraqi insurgency as a “monolithic” beast. Of course, this comment is ironic based on this document’s attempt to broadly analyze the Sunni insurgency. However, the point is that military commanders need to take a local approach to evaluating and dealing with the detailed characteristics, motivations, and grievances of the insurgents. This detailed approach is also a critical first step to understanding the nature of the population and is therefore crucial to improving Coalition and Iraqi Security Force ability to garner support from the population.

The perception of the Coalition as an occupation force is another critical vulnerability that must be overcome. Obviously, Coalition forces must continue to respect Iraqi culture, and it goes without saying that Iraqi forces must take the lead whenever and wherever possible. However, the Coalition should stop all major conventional offensive action, or at a minimum take a critical look at the cost benefit analysis of such operations. In the past such offensive actions motivated relatively neutral Iraqis to “avenge the blood of relatives whether

they had been killed by accident”⁴³ or otherwise, and while the offensive actions deterred many insurgents they also “encouraged others to perpetuate the insurgency.”⁴⁴ In addition to any insurgents created, the large scale damage to property that typically results from such operations certainly does not endear the Coalition to the local population, and it is doubtful that any Information Operation campaign will convince the local Iraqis to blame the insurgents. In addition, such offensive actions have the look and feel of invasion and as such play into the insurgent groups’ assertion that the Coalition is bent on conquering Iraq. For similar reasons, this cost benefit analysis also applies to any Iraqi led offensive operations and is especially pertinent when viewed in the context of the Iraqi Security Force as the “Iraqi ‘face’ on an American military occupation.”⁴⁵ Additionally, though sound counterinsurgency doctrine recognizes that it is “imperative to maximize the use of indigenous forces”⁴⁶ a proper mix within the Iraqi Security Force is imperative to avoid any perceived internal occupation. Generically, it is not difficult to imagine a situation where a predominately Sunni security force is deployed to provide security in a predominately Shi’a area or vice versa; based on sectarian divides, it is also easy to imagine the potential consequences. Keeping a local approach to security may assist military commanders in tailoring their forces not only to meet military requirements but also to meet the more diverse and complex ethnic, sectarian, and tribal diversity of any particular region.

Conclusion

The insurgency in Iraq is a complex mix of ethnic, sectarian, and tribal alliances combined with the additional influence of foreign fighters and common criminals. Taken as a whole, it is nearly impossible to categorize and analyze. Terms such as rejectionist,

Saddamist, terrorist,⁴⁷ and Ba’thist, Islamist, or tribalist do little to alleviate confusion.

However, basic center of gravity analysis reveals that in broad terms the conflict is largely a struggle for legitimacy and the support of the people. On the one side you have the insurgent groups attempting to destabilize the country through terrorism and guerilla warfare. On the other side you have the Coalition and the Iraqi Security Force attempting to neutralize the violence and maintain order and progress throughout the country. Both sides have critical vulnerabilities that affect their legitimacy and threaten their overall objectives. The insurgent can not agree on an alternative to the current government, and the Coalition constantly battles the “occupation force” label. Coalition commanders and the insurgents have many avenues and can pursue numerous paths to overcome their vulnerabilities and reach their objectives. For the Coalition winning in Iraq will take political, economic, and security reforms, but security must come first. However, at this time, Coalition and Iraqi Security Force can not provide appropriate levels of security throughout all of Iraq. Therefore they should concentrate locally where they can in fact provide sufficient and sustained security. This sustained local security is a key step to establishing the local legitimacy of the Iraqi Security Force and the Coalition; this local legitimacy, if perceived to flow from the Iraqi government, will in-turn lead to the local legitimacy of the Iraqi Government and as security spreads, in theory, so does the legitimacy and control of the Iraqi Government.

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⁴ Mark Cancian, “Centers of gravity are a myth,” *United States Naval Institute, Proceedings, September 1998*, 1.

⁵ John D. Waghelstein, and Donald Chisolm, “Analyzing Insurgency,” (research paper, Newport RI: U.S. Naval War College, Joint Military Operations Department, 2006) 2.

⁶ Bard O’Neill, *From Revolution to Apocalypse, Insurgency and Terrorism* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2005), 66-67.

⁷ U.S. Joint Staff, IV-12

⁸ U. S. Department of the Navy, *Navy Planning NWP 5-01*, Draft Navy Warfare Publication (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, April 2006), Glossary-4.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ U.S. Joint Staff, IV-15.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of the Navy, C1-C5.

¹⁵ Amatzia Baram, “Who are the Insurgents? Sunni Arab Rebels in Iraq,” (Report, Washington DC: United States Institute for Peace, April 2006) 6.

¹⁶ Ibid, 2.

¹⁷ Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *The Future of Iraq* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004) 151.

¹⁸ Baram,4.

¹⁹ Ibid, 4.

²⁰ Ibid, 7.

²¹ Ibid, 14.

²² International Crisis Group, *In their own Words: Reading the Iraqi Insurgency*, (Report, Brussels: International Crisis Group, 15 February 2006), 15.

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- ²³ Waghelstein, 8
- ²⁴ International Crisis Group, 15.
- ²⁵ Ibid, 23.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ U.S. Joint Staff, IV-11.
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